

Asbestos cleanup spurs clash of ideas

By DORY DEVLIN

The company largely responsible for the cleanup of two asbestos-contaminated areas in Passaic Township does not agree with the federal Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) plan to do the job.

The Texas-based National Gypsum Co. has faulted the EPA's mediation procedures, claiming they could increase whatever risk of asbestos exposure exists.

"The process outlined would increase the potential of releasing airborne fibers," said Allan Cecil, National Gypsum's vice president for public affairs.

Two sites, one a 12-acre parcel on White Bridge Road, the other a 30-acre tract on New Vernon Road, are the focus of the cleanup. Last year, the EPA discovered through soil tests that asbestos contamination had spread to the properties from the site of a former National Gypsum plant in Millington, now on the federal superfund list.

Preferred by the EPA is a \$5.7 million plan to mix the asbestos-laden soil with a cement-based mixture to stabilize the asbestos and prevent it from becoming airborne.

That plan is one of four mediation methods proffered by the EPA, ranging in cost from \$1.7 million to \$24.7 million. The least costly would involve placing vegetative "caps" over the contaminated sites, while the most expensive option would incorporate excavating the soil and transporting it to a vitrification site, where it is transformed

into a glass-like substance through heat and fusion.

The EPA prefers the on-site stabilization process because it will significantly reduce the risks posed by airborne asbestos and is cost effective compared to the other alternatives.

But Cecil said National Gypsum, which will contribute to the cleanup of the asbestos, believes a cheaper option will be less risky.

"It's our opinion that the method they have recommended would increase whatever risk was present because you're going to be stirring up the contents of the area," Cecil said. "Any time you pump cement into an area, you're going to displace what's in that area that the cement is filling."

The option preferred by the company is akin to the EPA's \$1.7 million vegetative cap plan.

"By putting a soil and vegetative cap on top, you don't have to disturb what's underneath it, and it's less expensive," Cecil said, adding that is a proven method, unlike the solidifying process.

National Gypsum also disagrees with the EPA's risk analysis, calling it "inaccurate and improper" and contrary to its own risk analysis guidelines.

The White Bridge Road area includes a horse farm owned by Dave and Joyce Major, who agree with the EPA's mediation choice. Another property affected is a tree service firm on 30 acres on New Vernon Road owned by Hans and Helena Tielmann.

The EPA will consider National Gypsum's response and other comments submitted by residents before making its decision by the end of this month, said Richard Cahill, an EPA spokesman. The deadline for public input was Friday.

If the agency chooses the solidification process it now favors, it will take about a year to design the project and another 10 months for the actual mixing procedure to be completed.

National Gypsum, which manufactures and distributes gypsum wallboard, occupied an 11-acre Division Avenue site from 1953 to 1973, when TIFA Ltd. purchased the property and began leasing it to several smaller manufacturing and service firms.

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